

As India turns 60, a new way of teaching is born

Political and critical thinking embraced

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NEW DELHI: Quietly, with barely a whisper of protest, which is rare in this country, a great upheaval is under way inside Indian high school classrooms.

For perhaps since the India gained its independence 60 years ago today, politics is part of the teaching of political science, part of a broader revision of school curriculum with potentially long-lasting implications for how Indian children grasp the workings of their own democracy.

Shikha Chhabra, 16, offered an example from her new Grade 12 Contemporary World Politics textbook.

She had always been taught that the Nonaligned Movement, in which India played a leading role during the Cold War years, carving out at least a rhetorical policy of independence from both the Soviet Union and the United States, was "a wonderful thing." The new textbook, she noticed, treats it differently. "Now they raise the question — does the Nonaligned Movement really apply in the world today? Was it just fence-sitting?"

She decided for herself that it no longer applied, joining a very contemporary hue-and-cry among politicians and political observers in this country about the merits of India's new friendship with the United States. The class had a rich debate about the pros and cons of aligning with the United States. It came during a chapter called "U.S. Hegemony in World Politics."

"You do question what India's strategy should be," Chhabra said.

Her teacher, Abha Malik, head of political science at Sanskriti School, pounded on the textbook. "You can't have a regular, regular class with this," she said, and beamed. Teachers need to encourage classroom debate, draw from contemporary sources on

politics in India and beyond. Newspaper clippings tumbled out of the pages of her own day planner. On Tuesday, she passed around photocopies of one on India's nuclear capability. "As political science teachers we have to be abreast of what's happening," she said. "This book won't let you sit still."

In a country where rote learning has prevailed even at the most elite schools, the new emphasis on critical thinking is a major shift in pedagogy. More revolutionary still is the substance of the new curriculum. Before, the emphasis ' in political science was political theory. "This is realpolitik," Malik said.

In the Indian politics textbook, for instance, which Malik will start teaching at the end of this month, are explicit mentions of several highly controversial political events of the recent past, from emergency rule under former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the mid-1970s to the attacks on Muslims in Gujarat just five years ago.

Chapter Four asks students to "identify two aspects of India's foreign policy that you would like to retain and two you would like to change," with supporting reasons.

The last chapter of the Indian politics textbook asks the class to trace the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, which is the country's principal opposition party today, since the emergency era.

"Basically political science taught you everything except politics. It was considered too risky," said Yogendra Yadav, one of the two chief advisers for the political science textbooks. "I thought my task is to get students to think critically, to begin to question everything, to develop a healthy respect for democracy, not by worshiping it but looking at it squarely."

Pakistan's school curriculum is undergoing its own churning. The curriculum for Pakistan Studies, as the high school course is called, would include for the first time references to Pakistan's pre-Islamic history — the Indus Valley civilization of 3000 BC, for instance, and remove "hate speech" against non-Muslim minorities, said Ahmad Salim, whose organization, the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, has been advocating for change. The textbooks have not yet been published.

In contemporary India, revising school curricula is itself a political ritual. A close analogy may be the debate over creationism in American education.

Governments of the day, whether left or right, have sought to change curriculum to suit their beliefs, with history serving as the principal battleground for competing ideologies. Attempts by the BJP, for instance, which led a coalition government until 2004, to revise ancient Indian history drew howls of protest from its critics. The BJP for its part said it had sought to strip history teaching of what it called leftist bias.

The new textbooks have drawn remarkably little protest since they were introduced into classrooms about four months ago, probably because New Delhi's most influential political animals have not yet read them. But ask about the very notion of teaching contemporary politics, and you'll hear discomfort and words of caution. Recent events are simply too "surcharged" to be taught dispassionately in a classroom, said Swapan Dasgupta, a conservative columnist and the father of an 11th-grader. That is especially true, he argued, considering that post-1947 history has been rarely broached in class.

"Out of the blue you teach not only something that happened 50 years ago but you teach something that happened five years ago," Dasgupta said, cautioning that he had yet to read the new texts. "There's nothing wrong in learning about politics, but don't teach things that happened yesterday. It is going to be politicized."

Sudheendra Kulkarni, a former official in the BJP government and now also a newspaper columnist, also sounded a note of caution about touching delicate episodes of the recent past. "Governments changing textbooks every time one or other party is in power is something that should be resisted," he said.

Certainly, he said, his own party had tried to revise curriculum in its day. But that was to correct what he considered "leftist distortion" in the representations of India's ancient past. "But governments changing textbooks every time one or other party is in power is something that should be resisted."

The architects of the new textbook insist that this is not a politicized curriculum. They cite Chapter Six of the Indian politics text. For the first time in a politics textbook, there is mention of emergency rule, from June 1975 to January 1977, the handiwork of the then-prime minister and Congress Party leader, Gandhi. Her party is in power today; her daughter-in-law is the party chief.

Among the questions the chapter poses is how a democracy can balance "routine functioning" of government with "continuous political protests."

"Should the citizens have full freedom to engage in protest activity," it asks, "or should they have no such right at all?"

Malik, the teacher, said she could glean what she called "a new thrust" in education, to make the student think. "This book announces India's arrival," she went on. "I feel good teaching it."

Her one worry, though, was the abiding paradigm of Indian education. No matter how much critical thinking she instilled in her wards, she said, she would have to make sure they scored well on the standardized tests next spring. Even in the new India, test scores make or break a child's future.

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